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Keep CIA Probe 'Within Bounds'

In the wake of the Cuban fiasco, should Congress investigate the Central Intelligence Agency? Or should Congress, as has frequently been suggested, establish a permanent "watchdog" committee for a continuing study of the CIA?

As good a case as can be made for a congressional investigation now, a better case can be made for leaving it within the executive branch of the government, where it has already been launched. President Kennedy has named Gen. Maxwell Taylor, retired Army chief of staff, Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy and Adm. Arleigh Burke, chief of naval operations, to study all U.S. efforts in what has been described as "paramilitary" operations (guerrilla warfare and related tactics). In the course of that study, the CIA will undoubtedly come in for major review of its operations, and the eminence of the investigators would seem to guarantee a thorough, constructive study.

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Congress has every right to investigate the CIA, having established it by congressional act in 1947, voting annually for its funds (which are generally disguised in other governmental budgets for security reasons) and having acted several times to extend CIA authority and operations. But a congressional investigation has some inherently dangerous features related to this field. As sincere as the investigators might be, it would be next to impossible to insure the secrecy which the CIA, by

its very nature, must have to continue its work. And it would be impossible to keep the congressional investigation from becoming a finger-pointing operation in regard to who was to blame for the failure of the Cuban "invasion." As useful as it will be to know how and why the Cuban affair failed, and to what extent agencies of the U. S. government failed in its support, it would serve no constructive purpose to air that dirty linen in public.

The whole theory under which the Central Intelligence Agency operates is difficult to reconcile with democratic government. By its very nature, intelligence work must be clandestine, secret, sometimes double-dealing and bootlegging on the criminal. And paramilitary operations are a kind of warfare with which this nation has little or no experience. It is entirely possible that the president's investigating commission may recommend that paramilitary operations be taken out of the CIA, which would seem to have its hands full with the information-gathering function that is the primary purpose of an intelligence agency.

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There is no doubt that this is an appropriate time for an evaluation of the Central Intelligence Agency. But unless we are willing to run the risk of serious damage to this essential, if unpleasant function, the evaluation is best made within the executive department of the government.